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SUBJECT: CYPRUS TO CONSCRIPT HERETOFORE EXEMPT MINORITIES

REF: A. NICOSIA 52

[1](#)B. USDAO NICOSIA IIR 6 823005007

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Cyprus's Ministry of Defense announced January 9 its intention to lift an exemption that allowed the country's "official religious groups" -- Maronites, Armenians, and Latins -- to avoid compulsory military service in the Greek Cypriot National Guard (GCNG). Rather than presenting a united front, each group has raised its own concerns in different manners over this policy shift. We expect their efforts will fail, however, and minorities likely will be joining the Greek Cypriot majority at boot camp in summer 2007. End summary.

Announcement, Not Consultation

[1](#)2. (SBU) At 25 months, compulsory military service for males in the government-controlled area of Cyprus is amongst the longest in the world. For over 30 years, Greek Cypriots have placed their lives on hold following high school graduation, a growing source of discontent here among youth (deferment on suspect grounds is rampant, however.) Maronites, Armenians, and Latins served in the military between the breakdown of the constitutional republic (1963) and the conflict of 1974; in the aftermath, Archbishop/President Makarios ordered their exemption, partly because many Maronites remained enclaved in the Turkish Cypriot-controlled area north of the cease-fire line. Only in 1992-1994, under former President George Vassiliou, did minority youth serve in the GCNG, a decision that President Glafkos Clerides later rescinded.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In separate January meetings with Poloffs, leaders of Cyprus's three official religious groups -- Antonis Hadjirooussos of the Maronite Catholics, Vartkes Mahdessian of the Armenian Orthodox, and Benito Mantovani of the Roman Catholics ("Latins") -- recounted how they sat stunned in the office of MoD Permanent Secretary Petros Kareklas as he revealed the government's intentions. Each characterized the surprise January 9 summons, hours before the announcement, as a fait accompli, not a consultation. According to Hadjirooussos, when he raised some initial reservations, Kareklas cut him off immediately. Draft legislation to allow the groups' conscription would go to the Council of Ministers as early as February and to Parliament shortly thereafter, the Permanent Secretary had claimed, and likely would become law by April in order to allow for summer recruiting.

14. (SBU) Greek Cypriot complaints over special treatment likely underpinned the MoD's initiative, especially after RoC Ombudsman Iliana Nicolaou found in February 2006 that exemption from GCNG service on religious grounds constituted reverse discrimination (Ref B). In his January 9 public remarks, Kareklas also noted Cyprus's "immediate, urgent need to fill the ranks." Maronite leader Hadjiroussos was unconvinced by the official rationale for the policy shift. After all, he emphasized, "It was the RoC, not the religious groups, that had kept us out because of security and language issues." Further, he calculated that his group -- the largest of the three -- would yield barely 40 recruitable youth annually, i.e., not nearly enough to meaningfully broach the personnel gap.

Groups Divided and Conquered?

15. (SBU) Representatives' reactions toward the RoC plans have varied greatly, and Hadjiroussos has proven the most outspoken. Initially signaling that his Maronites would not fight the decision, he recently changed his tune, informing us January 21 that he had voiced opposition in letters to President Tassos Papadopoulos, House President Demetris Christofias, and even Pope Benedict XVI. In his correspondence, Hadjiroussos evoked the UN Framework for the Protection of Minorities, further arguing that "we are being asked to join a Greek Orthodox army." Religious reasoning seems somewhat ancillary, however. In earlier meetings with the Embassy, for example, Maronites claimed they feared joining the GCNG because they still had residents in, and property claims on, four historic villages located north of the Green Line, surrounded (and in one case, occupied) by the

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Turkish Army (Ref A). Hadjiroussos pleaded, "We are scared that the Turkish Cypriots will start to see us as enemies."

16. (SBU) Mahdessian, representing 3,000 Armenians, has been quick to distance his community's position from that of the Maronites. While he, too, complained over the RoC's lack of consultation, Mahdessian told us January 25 (Septel) that Armenians "would like to join the army (GCNG)." He had four reservations regarding the government conscription plan, however. Pointing to discrimination against his community's enlisted soldiers in 1992-94, he is requesting that Armenians serve together in the same unit(s). They should also serve in larger cities, near Armenian churches. Believing many of his flock might also seek careers in the GCNG, he is asking that the officers' exam give consideration to Armenians' weaker Greek-language abilities. Finally, Mahdessian desires a deferred implementation of the new policy because it would be unfair for Armenian youth, particularly those already accepted into university, to have to change plans with scant warning.

17. (SBU) The most cautious response has come from Mantovani, representing Cyprus's 1,000-odd "Latins" (Roman Catholics). He told Poloffs January 25 that he had no intention of "forwarding reservations" on the MoD initiative. While no parent was pleased with the idea of a son in harm's way, Mantovani explained, the group could ill-afford to spurn the Greek Cypriot majority. He was convinced that the government would take the community's (unspecified) concerns into consideration. Mantovani held that, of the three religious groups, Latins could assimilate the best. Referring to the 1992-1994 period, he remembered only a couple of instances of discrimination within GCNG ranks against recruits with "Latin" last names, and then not by Greek Cypriots but by Greek training officers.

Majority Community Pays Little Heed

¶8. (SBU) Media reaction to the groups' concerns has been unsympathetic, with no champion for their cause emerging from the majority. Most commentators have focused on the benefits they have reaped under the GCNG's security umbrella, adding that the groups had chosen to align themselves with the Greek Cypriot community shortly after Cyprus won independence from Britain. The three reps concurred, but were quick to point out that their groups had little real "choice" in 1960, selecting between a Christian, albeit Greek Orthodox community, and a Turkish, Muslim one. Their protests did not convince many columnists, however, who spun their complaints as proof the groups, especially the Maronites, were ungrateful.

¶9. (SBU) Nor do the three minority reps expect a policy change from the government. Kareklas, they claim, has all but ignored their misgivings. None expected a positive reply from the Presidential Palace. Hadjiroussos told Poloff January 21 that the Maronites' only hope for continued military exemption was a quiet Vatican intervention. When asked what action the groups might take next, Hadjiroussos shrugged, resigned to Armenian youth being forced to conform. Hadjiroussos shrugged again when asked why the groups did not join forces in their appeal.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Befitting their proportion (approximately two percent) of the general population -- and regardless of the special recognition the constitution affords -- Cyprus's official religious minority groups exert little political muscle. Faced with emigration or the alternative of living in a majority Muslim (Turkish Cypriot) community, they have resigned themselves to slights by the Orthodox majority, aware that aggressive opposition might threaten their privileged status. Their reaction to the MoD's determination on conscription is indicative and predictable: some early grumbling, a protest letter or two, a "Hail Mary" heave to the Vatican, but in the end, submission to the G/C majority.
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